CALLS FROM SZECHWAN'S WILDERNESS

By

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THE BORDER LANDS described in this article represent one of the few remaining frontiers of civilization. Here is a region greatly blessed by nature, rich in undeveloped resources, inhabited by people who have been victims of many disasters, and who have never had a chance at education. Because of the exigencies of war Chengtu has become the educational center of China and the faculties and students of the Christian Colleges there, at the invitation of the Ministry of Education, have undertaken pioneer work in this part of Tibet so closely adjacent to the Chengtu plain. Dr. Liu writes of the response from people who for the first time are realizing that education can change communities and lift all of life to a higher plane. What more convincing justification than this thrilling story could be offered for Christian education? This work is one of the projects of Ginling College. In maintaining Ginling we are training girls to answer the calls to this work of far-reaching and lasting importance.

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As the Japanese invasion has driven millions of people into the less well-known part of China, the center of activity has shifted from the coast, inland. In order to keep the homeless students occupied during the summer vacations and at the same time to teach them the real meaning of social service through active participation in social work and research, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with educational institutions, has started student summer work under faculty supervision among the tribal people in the so-called borderlands. I have had the privilege of going for two summers in succession, 1941 and 1942. The more contacts one has with the border people, the better one knows them; the deeper one sees into their urgent needs and the louder one hears their calls, the more difficult it becomes for one to forget them. One is compelled to do something about it. Therefore, I feel that I cannot but broadcast their calls with the hope that when those who are in a position to help, financially or otherwise, hear these calls, they will respond.

I. The Call for Better Education

In Wenchwan County: Wenchwan County is in the northwest corner of Szechwan Province, separated from adjoining counties by high mountains. It has an area of over 1,171 square miles, and a population of approximately 22,000, among whom are Chinese, Tibetans, and Ch'iang tribe people.

When we were having our lunch at a village on our way to Wenchwan, the head of the district heard that the Student Border Service Corps had arrived and he hurried to the restaur-

ant to meet us. He talked with us long and begged for our help. He said that in the area entrusted to his management there are about 700 families, approximately 3,000 people. Due to the mountainous character of the land and the shortness of the growing season, the food supply of the region is not sufficient. However, there are more than 180 kinds of medicinal herbs growing on the high mountains, and the slopes are good for the cultivation of tung oil trees. Furthermore, fruits of temperate climate, such as peaches, pears, plums, all grow well; and yet none of these resources are developed.

On the higher slopes there are thousands of acres of pasture lands for grazing, but there are only a few cattle roaming around. The lower hills are thickly covered by bamboo forests, good material for the making of paper, yet it is not utilized. Besides this, petroleum, bituminous coal and gold have been found, yet the district has never been scientifically surveyed or developed.

"You see," he emphatically concluded, "my people are poor, but they are not interested in any of these, because they are deeply absorbed in gambling. Come, come and educate my people. If they know more, their interest will surely be shifted to something more worth while. Now when I ask them to cooperate with me on projects for the good of the community, they refuse because they do not understand. Educate them, then they will know what is good and what is harmful. Please do come and do some social service for us." This is the call from Yin-Siu-Wan, a place beyond a mountain, but only about 50 miles from Chengtu.

A little farther north we came to Peach Pass, a tiny village located in a long narrow gorge, where there is very little land fit for cultivation. War, flood and fire have brought disaster to the region, and within 50 years, the population has been

reduced from over 100 families to less than 10. There is certainly silver ore in the valley, and forests and medicinal herbs on the high mountains, but the man in authority is an opium addict, and the people are ignorant, so these great natural resources are undeveloped.

The next region we visited was the territory controlled by the Feudal Lord of Wan-sze. The ancestral royal lord of this territory was from Tibet, called in by the Chinese government to fight the mountain tribes in that northwest wilderness. After he had successfully conquered the tribes, he was given a few valleys where he and his men could settle down. Therefore, he became king in his own territory and his men became his subjects. He owned the land and his men became his tenants. They paid taxes to him and he was responsible for any tax to the Chinese government.

The Wan-sze-tu-sze owns 28 valleys with a population of about 6,000 people, all of Tibetan descent. He has four headquarters, located at strategic points in his domain. We visited two of his castles, both of which were in a sad state of dilapidation. The last feudal lord died about three years ago, leaving his young widow in charge of his lands and his people. The actual direction of affairs, however, is in the hands of paid men, most of them opium addicts.

Since the destruction by the Communist Army in 1935, no place in the whole territory has recovered its former prosperity and grandeur. Even the castle in which the royal mother and sisters of the former lord are now residing, is in a state of disrepair. Doors that were broken are still not mended; roofs and towers are on the point of falling down. The private lamasary is a heap of broken tiles; prayer wheels are broken and prayer sheets are tramped in the floor. The whole place gives an impression of decay and death. However, the old lady

was kind and friendly. She told us all the sad experiences that she has gone through, and she has decided that nothing is better than to study and to become educated and to live an intelligent life. She entertained us royally and showed us the room in which her two daughters are studying and also showed the compositions that they had written. She told us that she had employed a private tutor for her daughters, and when they have enough background she will send them to school in Chengtu.

In cooperation with the Wenchwan government, she has also opened a school near her residence for the children of the people. But the people are widely distributed in the valleys beyond the mountains and one school is only a drop of water in the ocean.

The castle we visited at Grass Slope Valley, where a paid man is in charge of the property and people, is a mere skeleton. It is a huge place with enough rooms to hold Ginling College and more, but some of the stairways are partly gone, others totally gone, and there are big holes in the floor. The kitchen is larger than any of the lecture halls of West China University, but it is empty and deserted. The whole building gives an impression of a haunted place. We slept for three nights in one of the front rooms and it constantly reminded us of the "House of Seven Gables." If only somebody could have it and turn it into a social center, what good it would do for the communities in that vicinity!

The valleys of Grass Slope usually have more rain than the surrounding region, and even in times of great drought in other sections, these valleys are green and inviting. The tragic part is that while the natural vegetation is luxuriant, the cultivated lands look badly neglected, and the people look sleepy and lazy. With all the mountains thickly covered with vegeta-

tion, they have not enough fuel to use. Their houses seem about to come down and the people live on the edge of starvation, yet the valley smiles with potential wealth. Lacquer and pepper trees have been sources of wealth in the past, but are now neglected.

In the upper reaches of the valleys there are vast stretches of pasture lands but they have few animals, because they fear the attacks of wild animals. In the lower valleys, very little wheat is cultivated for the same reason. There are plenty of medicinal herbs on the high mountains, yet they say they do not have people to do the digging. It seems that Grass Slope Valley is a place where Nature has bestowed much but man is sitting and waiting in his dreams for the final crack of doom. Such is the homeland of the famous panda that reached New York by air in 1941!

The lamasary at the west end of the region is no exception. It, too, is neglected and dilapidated. The lama, who found it difficult to keep his body and soul together, ran away last year. Rolls and rolls of ancient lama prayers are buried under piles of broken tiles. Prayer wheels are badly weathered and broken. The whole valley gives one the impression that what the people have had has been taken away from them, yet nothing has been given to them to fill the aching void. They seem to be corpses without souls. During our five days' visit in the region, we felt that we were moving around in a graveyard inhabited by ghosts. But even here we had one experience that made the people live in our memories.

At sunset one day, as we were looking for a place to spend the night, we met an old woman returning from her work in the field. We asked her if we could spend the night with her, and she immediately revealed her suspicion of us by her many sharp questions. She finally decided to accept us, however, and

AMONG THE

The castle of the Wan-sze-tu-sze

Daughter of the feudal lord of Wan-sze, a future Ginling student

The tribes people gather on flat-topped houses to sing

RIBES PEOPLE

Ginling girls in Giarong costume. Dr. Liu in the center

The tribal dance at the end of the Training Institute

Turnip Village showing the terraced fields

after a long visit in her kitchen, she and her family came to the conclusion that we were not harmful people. They then became very friendly and hospitable and decided to give us a treat of potatoes. One of the Ginling girls, bare-foot in her straw sandals, helped to dig the potatoes, washed them in the cold mountain stream, and brought them back to the house. The old lady was delighted. "These people are not good for nothing," she murmured to her husband, "they can do hard work too." Thus we won their confidence, and they talked to us of their many problems. In the evening, the whole family gathered on the flat roof of their house and we began to learn their mountain songs. Hearing the singing, the whole valley echoed and people from far and near came and joined us on that single roof. After that night, we did not see another such lively group in all the Grass Slope Valley.

A week later, when we were in the city of Wenchwan, the old lady rushed into the place where we were having our breakfast. She said, "I have heard you have come to Wenchwan and are on your way to Weichow, so I have rushed over the mountain to tell you that by the time you come back in September, the walnuts will be ripe and my other fruits will be good for eating, too. So, on your return, you must visit us again." We told her we would try but could not promise. She continued, "Yes, you must come back. We have just come to know you and like you. You must not go away without seeing us again." We regret that we did not get to see her on our return trip, as time did not allow. But if we could get that haunted castle as a social center, that particular community would act as a nucleus to start any kind of work, for they have already taken us in as friends.

We went through Turnip Village, a name that really represents nine settlements widely scattered through the mountains. The people, about 2,000 in number, are all of the Ch'iang

tribe. The land is fertile, but an adequate water supply is a serious problem. The mountainsides are being denuded in order to get more arable land, and in their ignorance, the people do not realize that the more such land they make, the fewer streams they have and the more serious becomes their water problem.

The people work very hard all day, but in the evenings they gathered eagerly around us, talking, singing and asking questions about life in the outside world. Since these evening meetings were not long enough to teach them all they wanted to know, we went to the fields with them in the day to help gather the pepper berries and we talked and sang as we worked.

The women usually pay very little attention to the comfort of their children. In the first place, most of them are doing the work of men and they really have no time to do more than keep their babies alive. In the second place, they have no idea of what to do. There is almost no such thing as clothing for the children; they are tied up in bundles just to keep them from getting frozen or sunburned. Therefore, during our evening gatherings, one of the Ginling girls cut patterns of children's clothing for them, and also made a garment for the little child of our host for demonstration. The women got so interested that a number of them brought over cloth, both old and new material, asking for help in sewing for their children. The women are also very much interested in learning to knit, because wool is a home product there.

They all complained against the school teacher. They said he had not taught ten days during the whole term. Children who have paid fees to go to school have not learned a single word for their money's worth. It is true that the getting of good teachers is not an easy job. The word "Borderland" still breathes terror to many people and living conditions are difficult, so it is hard to find well-trained teachers who want to

go there. Here is a call for those who want to sacrifice for a cause.

When we were ready to leave, nearly half of the village population turned out. Some women hung on to us and begged pathetically, "Must you go?" "We have not learned all that we want to learn yet." "Will you come back again next summer?" Their appeals made us feel that we must go back again. Can we resist such earnest requests as theirs?

In Li-fan County: When we left Turnip Village, we hurried toward the city of Li-fan. Li-fan County is second in size among all the counties of Szechwan, having an area of over 3,906 square miles, and a population of about 70,000, of whom 60,000 are tribes people.

In the entire territory of Li-fan there are at most forty primary schools and all of them are within a radius of less than 40 miles from Li-fan City. There is only one normal school, in the City of Weichow. Even with such a small number of schools, securing teachers is already becoming a tremendous task. The schools which do exist are very pathetic. Some lack adequate equipment, and almost without exception, they need better teachers.

However, the educational sky is not entirely overcast; there are still sparkling stars to be seen. When we reached the Lung-hsi Mountain settlement (of Ch'iang people), we were put up in the schoolhouse. It was the cleanest and most orderly place we had seen since we left Weichow. Maps were hanging on the wall and there was also a tiny library. The district leader told us that the place was their village temple until two years ago. The village people decided to throw out the gods and remodel the place into a schoolhouse. The property of the temple became the foundation fund for the school,

in charge of the district leaders. The religious teacher is allowed to live upstairs in the schoolhouse and his job at present is cooking for the school teachers and keeping the place clean.

The principal of the school is a young man in his twenties from somewhere near Shanghai, driven inland by the Japanese hostilities. According to the local custom, he is now married into a Ch'iang family and thereby becomes the heir of the family property and has all the privileges and responsibilities of the community.

There must be over sixty children in the school. In the evenings, when all of us were free, the pupils would gather in the schoolyard with their mothers and sisters and we had many a good time. They taught us their songs and we taught them ours, and we laughed at each others' mistakes. These children are alert, well-behaved and well trained.

There are still other star schools. The mountain settlement above Tung-hwa is also a Ch'iang people community. The Border Service Department of the Church of Christ has had a school there for three years. I could hardly believe my eyes when I re-visited the place this summer. I felt I must have gotten into a different community, because who can believe a community could change its outlook so much in a year's time. The children are full of life and interest. They put themselves whole-heartedly into their work as well as into their studies. Mothers and fathers have also learned to read. They are prompt in keeping appointments, loyal to their leaders and faithful to their promises.

One Ginling girl worked there for six months, and we had good reports of her everywhere we went, among the Ch'iang, the Giarong and the Chinese. The women kept ask-

ing us, "Will this teacher be coming back?" She not only won the people, but she made them different.

There is another school high up in the mountains where the teacher is a young man from Shantung, driven inland by the war. The inhabitants of this settlement are of the Giarong tribe and of the lama faith. This young man is doing so well that the district leader wants him to marry into his family.

Everywhere the district leaders begged for help in establishing schools, offering spacious rooms in official buildings, centrally located. Over and over we heard the same call: "Please do help us to have a school and give us a good teacher."

One day when we were cooking our lunch in a wayside inn, an old man came in and talked with us. He said he had just come down from the mountain next to the inn. He said that the people in his settlement greatly envy the people at Gia-Shan settlement (where the Ginling girl worked for six months). "The people there seem to live differently now; we must have a school too," he said. "Could you come and open a school?" We promised that we would bring his request to the leader of the Border Service Department and hope that they will be able to do something about it.

Calls for schools, for good teachers, for more intelligent living, for a better way of living are pouring out from the mountainsides. Even in the heart of the mountainous country of the Black River Valley, where the tribal people have practically nothing to do with the outside people, they are craving to know something of the world and to live a better life.

When we reached Li-fan City, we called on the governor as we had been requested to do. He presented two problems for our consideration.

First: He was planning to have a training class for all the primary school teachers in his county at Gia-Shan mountain settlement, and he asked if we would help. Of course we accepted the request without any hesitation.

Second: He had collected a number of reports of mineral deposits from the district leaders in the valleys around the city of Li-fan, and he asked if we would be willing to go and do some investigation about them. We gladly agreed to this also. He promised a subsidy in case we found this investigation carried us beyond our budget.

We started immediately for Yang-di mountain to investigate the deposits of iron ore, jade and coal. It is a most inaccessible region, and the trip took us longer than we had expected. The training institute was therefore half over before we arrived. My first impression of the teachers attending these classes was one of disappointment. They all seemed either very old or mere boys and, without exception, looked sickly and apathetic. But as we worked together, their interest grew, and they even asked for extra lectures. At the end of the course, the whole village turned out to see the play given by the teachers. After the play, the villagers carried in piles and piles of wood, lit a fire, and danced many tribal dances around the fire far into the night. The next morning the whole village presented the governor, staff and members of the training class a sheep and two chickens with the ceremony of the Ch'iang people. After the graduation exercises, the governor of the county, the village leaders, members of the student summer Border Service Corps, and members of the training class all feasted together on this present.

We learned later that, as a result of this training course, the teachers had organized themselves and were planning to issue a monthly paper for their mutual help in teaching. One

man was getting ready to go to one of the feudal lords in the wild west to help him to open a school. He wished very much that next summer we would send a few students to help them. People may look dull and uninteresting, but when their interest is aroused and when they know how, they are just as alert as anybody else. Everywhere one goes in the Borderlands, one feels that the harvest is ready, but the workers are few.

II. Calls for Clinical Help

Everywhere we went, people brought their sick, old and young, to us for treatment. We told them we were not medical doctors and we could not help them, but that we had a group of doctors who might be coming later. They would not listen. "You are teachers, surely you know what to do," they said, and they would not leave unless we did something. To those who had stomach aches, we gave soda; to others, we gave quinine. Others who had skin diseases, we gave a thorough wash and asked them to continue to do the same at least once a day. We gave them mercurochrome or iodine to color the water.

There are many kinds of diseases among them, some due to malnutrition and uncleanliness. Most of the people have eye trouble; many have goiter. Infant mortality is high, and the decrease in population marked. A settlement that had 300 families a hundred years ago now has about 80, and another village of over 100 families has been reduced to 3. A little care would save many of the children if only the people knew what to do. People like us, who have had no training in doctoring or nursing, can help some. Imagine what real doctors and nurses could do!

III. Calls for Practical Aids in Overcoming Difficulties Caused by Their Particular Environment

In all these isolated districts, the people complained of the destruction caused by wild pigs and bears. The villagers divide the night into watches and each family takes turns beating gongs and shouting to frighten these wild marauders from the crops. Droughts are frequent and severe; seed is scarce and very poor; domestic animals are few and subject to many severe epidemics. These difficulties create a vicious circle and conditions go from bad to worse. Resources cannot be utilized, the cultivated land is being laid waste, and the population decreases. If helped, the region could supply medicinal herbs, wool, hides and skins, lumber, mineral resources and other raw materials for industry and for national reconstruction.

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I hope I have given you a glimpse of life and its problems in the Szechwan mountain wilderness. Must the people who can survive this winter, and the generations that are to come to live in that land, continue to tread in the footsteps of their forefathers? They are calling out for a life line; are we not going to throw it to them if it is in our power to do so? Their well-being is connected with the health of the nation; and the nation's welfare is the welfare of all the nations.